

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 formed the basis for massive change to the state's educational system. This landmark reform was enacted by the Kentucky General Assembly in response to a successful lawsuit against the General Assembly, the governor, the Kentucky Board of Education, and the Chief State School Officer brought by the Coalition for Better Education (CBE) which represented 66 of the state's 176 districts. The Circuit Court found the state's funding mechanism inequitable while the Supreme Court found the system inadequate in the larger educational context, and mandated that the educational system be redesigned. One of the most comprehensive, statewide restructuring efforts ever attempted in the United States, the reform called for top-down and bottom-up systemic change in finance, governance, curriculum and assessment.

KERA established six goals for the schools of the Commonwealth.

Table 1-1 Kentucky School Goals	
Goal A	Expect a high level of achievement of all students.
Goal B	Develop student's abilities in six cognitive areas.
Goal C	Increase school attendance rates.
Goal D	Reduce dropout and retention rates.
Goal E	Reduce physical and mental health barriers to learning.
Goal F	Increase the proportion of students who make a successful transition to work, postsecondary education, and the military.

The first and second of these goals were translated into a "primarily performance-based assessment" program with two parts. Through a two-year period of public input and review, 75 Academic Expectations¹ or Performance Goals were produced. The State Board of Education approved these in December of 1991. Concerns arose about the measurability of learner goals three and four (see Table 2-1), and complaints were made about the obscurity of the wording of the valued outcomes. These concerns led to the revision and reduction of the valued outcomes to 57 in number. These were presented to the Kentucky State Board of Education on May 3-4, 1994. Since that time, they have been known as the Academic Expectations.

The second part was to establish an assessment system. The Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) was developed to measure progress toward the goals, primarily the expectations reflected in the first two goals of the act, and the non-cognitive goals outlined in Goals C, D, and F.

¹ These were initially referred to as "Valued Outcomes"

The purpose of this technical report is to provide information about the technical characteristics of KIRIS, the assessment component of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). A secondary purpose is to track the changes that have occurred to the system during the time span covered by this report. The time period under consideration is Accountability Cycle 3, which spanned the four school years ending 1995 through 1998. While some parts of this report are accessible to everyone, its intended audience is experts in psychometrics and educational research. The report is best understood with a working knowledge of measurement concepts such as reliability and validity, and statistical concepts such as correlation and central tendency. For some chapters, the reader is presumed to have basic familiarity with advanced topics in measurement and statistics such as item response theory and factor analysis.

COMPREHENSIVENESS

In order to address the many aspects of Kentucky's accountability system, this document contains extensive text and tables, which by no means provide all available detail about the assessment program or accountability system. As a means of keeping the size and cost of this manual within reason, summaries of important studies are provided with references to the location of more complete information. Much information concerning the assessment system is unique to this manual. Where practicable, data about the first two years of Accountability Cycle 3 (1995 and 1996) are presented in this volume. When that is impossible, reference is made to appropriate locations in the *KIRIS Accountability Cycle 2 Technical Manual*.

NOT JUST A TEST

While the focus of this technical report is the assessment system, it is critical to remember that the assessment is not independent of other components of the KERA reform. The assessment is one part of a complex network of activities that affects classroom instruction including professional development, curriculum restructuring, standard setting, and other components intended to help schools focus their energies on dramatic improvement in student learning. KIRIS is part of an integrated program of assessment, accountability, and curricular and instructional support, coupled with sweeping changes in school finance, governance, and organization, which have the purpose of changing the level of learning. The assessment can only be understood and evaluated properly in this full context.